



MAN GILBERT

A Beautiful War-Time Story

ELIZABETH W. BELLAMY

Author of "Four Oaks" and "The House of the Old Man"

CHAPTER I.
LITTLE MISSY.



"Praise de kingdom!" Glory-Ann ejaculated.

Miss Thorne, or, more familiarly, Miss Elvira, a gentle, faded beauty, attired according to the height of the style in the year of grace eighteen hundred and fifty-seven, was going, this warm May morning, "up to town," as they said in the plantations around Tallahassee in the days before the war; and the entire domestic retinue of Thorne Hill were assembled to speed her departure. Her brother, the colonel, had preceded her on horseback, for he was a man of too many inches to endure a carriage in a drive of nine long miles. It may have been because of these extra inches that he was called colonel, but his world acknowledged the title without inquiry.

The colonel's only daughter, Miss Winifred, a motherless child of eleven, was to go with her to be left at home in the home of her mother, the old lady whose name Miss Winifred had inherited. "Does not run in the family," she said, as she looked at the cushions and opened a little ornamental box of Bishop Ken's "Devotions." Miss Elvira spent her day, for the most part, reading this good book; she had formed the habit when she gave up Sir Walter Scott's novels, nobody knew how long ago—or nobody told. It was a practice that enabled her to forget little Miss Winifred, who was a young lady of exasperating devices.

"Wouldn't it be a pity if Missy was in dishy-er sun now dis minute," grumbled Glory-Ann as the carriage rolled away. "Yit she might be a poutin' somewhere 'bout de house," she amended, as she began laboriously to climb the stairs.

The house at Thorne Hill had a third story under the roof, lighted by a window in each gable, and from high peaked dormers, back and front. The stair landing divided this story into two long rooms, which were used chiefly for storing odds and ends. In the cool north room was Winifred's chosen den, and here, in an old discarded arm chair beside the gable window, Glory-Ann found her.

A wild looking child she was, very small for her eleven years, with scant promise of beauty. She had large eyes of a dark, uncertain color, a mouth for which her teeth seemed too many, and an insignificant nose. Strands of sunburnt hair curled round her forehead, and her curls and abundant reddish brown hair more over her face was freckled. She wore a faded green gingham dress, which marked her growth by two bands of deeper color in the skirt, where the proud ticks had been let out. Her arms and shoulders were bare, but pantalettes of a piece with her dress hung nearly to her ankles, and obscured her white stock hings. Her shoes, every way too large, laced up the front.

"Praise de kingdom!" Glory-Ann ejaculated, pausing in the doorway, her arms akimbo. "You do, honey?"

"Go 'way! Lemme 'lone!" was Missy's response.

But Glory-Ann subsided to the floor beside the arm chair, and with a sigh, and there she crouched, her hands clasping her knees. She foresaw that the exhortation to duty she felt bound to deliver would occupy a portion of time distinctly appreciable by her size and elderly joints. "Why 'n' you mind 'yo book, missy?" she asked.

"I'm tired of this old plantation!" Missy declared, indignantly. "I want to go over an' ever so far away." "This is the turn of the young lady's lament whenever her aunt went up to town with out her."

"You'd be tuk wid a mighty homin' ter git back," said Glory-Ann. "You ter talk 'bout quitin' here, when you can't so much as move 'yo self," she concluded, half in play, half in reproachful pride.

"I can!" retorted Missy, indignantly, as she tugged at the string and inadequate blue ribbon that was supposed to keep in submission her rebellious hair.

"Den huckum you don't niver do it?" demanded Glory-Ann, with sly humor.

To this thrust, Missy made no reply, and the old nurse began anew to exhort her to "mind her book."

"Do, now, Missy, lak a good cude, jes' as Missy-virey said; 'an' I'm gwine ter de nicest little kiddy in dis prospect, Missy slowly rose, and clasping her small sun-browned hands on the top of her head, stood contemplating, with lazy indifference, her old nurse's struggling achievement of the perpendicular. When at last Mom Bee, with a grunt of thanksgiving, stood upon her feet, Missy's eyes had found an attraction in the Home Field, beyond the garden fence, where the corn in the furrows was making a promising show of green. In an instant her languor and indifference vanished.

"Mom Bee! Mom Bee!" she cried excitedly. "There's Daddy Gilbert in the Home Field; you reckon he's goin' to the branch?"

"Yes, he's at dat, now," said Glory-Ann, in a discouraged tone. "Why ain't you mindin' 'yo book, stiddy studyin' dat ole nigger's doin'?"

"I'm a goin' with him!" Missy announced, as she rushed from the room, and went tearing downstairs deaf to all

"Jes' look at her now!" lamented Glory-Ann, as the child slipped through a gap in the garden paling, and made wild haste across the furrows, reckless of damage to the growing corn. "She is jes' as heady as Mawse Nick herself; an' mawster ain't got no room ter complain when his chillen tek dey own way; dey is made after his own petterun plum!"

"I'm a goin' with you!" panted Missy, as soon as she was within hearing distance of her father's much indulged old slave, who, being slightly lame, and duly considerate of the corn crop, was making his way leisurely.

"Mawster above!" exclaimed the old man, with a grin that displayed his big white teeth. "Here you come 'scumplin' de cawn lak so much pusey 'n' gittin' 'yo skin tanned up. Why 'n' you satisfied ter set in de gret house, lak de lady you wuz bawn?"

"I want to go wadin'," said Missy.

"I ain't gwine ter no branch," said old Gilbert, with decision; and before the child could recover from the surprise of her disappointment, he asked with pathetic eagerness, "Is mawster hearn fum Mawse Nick lately, ez you knows on?"

"There, now," cried Missy, angrily, "I was just forgettin' 'bout Brer Nicholas! I ain't come out here for you to talk to me 'bout Brer Nicholas; it makes me all-swellin'—just here." And Missy, with her slender hands across her heart, began to sob.

"Now, now, honey, doan you go cry," old Gilbert remonstrated. "Mawse Nicholas gwine come home one o' dese days." But the old man sighed. He was not so sure of his prophecy himself.

"I want him today! I want him now!" sobbed Missy. "I do believe I'll be a whole everlastin' year befo' I see Brer Nicholas any mo'; and me with no brother and no sister, 'cep'ial' only him."

"Mawster drows de reins too tight," murmured old Gilbert, communing with himself. "Huckum he kin be so hard on his own flesh en blood, on so easy wid de po' 'count ole nigger?"

His "no countness" was a point much insisted upon by Daddy Gilbert, who cherished his slight lameness as a means of securing him an immunity from any regular work.

"I don't see as you're so no 'count," Missy objected. "You do no work 'n' Tom Quash and Griffin bim. They couldn't make round bottomed baskets, not if they was to try."

The old man chuckled with gratified vanity.

"And I am goin' with you—no matter if you ain't goin' to the branch," she declared.

"No, you go 'long o' me, Missy," said old Gilbert, uneasily. "Hill's too fur. You jes' tote 'yo self back ter de gret house."

"I'm tired of de house," Missy said, beginning to cry afresh.

"Now ain't dat a pity?" exclaimed old Gilbert, impatiently. "I'm grieved at Glory-Ann, lemme tell you, run loose in dishy-er sun. You jes' go 'long back, Missy, en' I'm gwine ketch you a Molly cotton tail, or melleba a squirrel."

Missy paused, glowering from under her puckered brows. The house had no attractions for her while the sun was shining warm and bright, and the woods were waving boughs of green. But suddenly the frown relaxed; Missy was inspired by a brilliant purpose. She perceived that it might be possible to steal off to that dingy little dwelling in the midst of the plum thicket, on the other side of the road, beyond the cornfield, where she hoped to find Deia Furnival, a girl eight years her senior, for whom she entertained an immense respect. It mattered nothing to this daughter of the blue-blooded Thorne family that her father was a carpenter, and that her mother made dresses for the ladies of Tallahassee; Missy found her altogether admirable. For Deia was gentle and patient; she assumed none of those airs of superiority that rendered Flora Thorne, the colonel's beautiful niece, so obnoxious to her little cousin. Missy had heard, a few days before, that Deia was not in Tallahassee; it therefore occurred to her that she might be found with the carpenter's kinfolk, who inhabited the sorry little house at the bend of the Thorne Hill road.

With the colonel and Miss Elvira on the road to town with Glory-Ann busy in the house, and Daddy Gilbert wending his solitary way to the woods, Missy decided that she might venture to steal off for an hour or so, without risk of discovery. She turned her face toward the home, but she had gone only a few yards, when she abruptly changed her course and began to walk rapidly across the field in the direction of the road.

But just as she took this turn, old Gilbert was minded to look back, and he instantly detected her purpose.

"Hi-yi!" he called out, sternly. "Go back ter de gret house, stiddy! You got no call to foller after dem po' white trash! De Thorne is quality; de ain't got no business wid de Furnivals."

"You mean ole nigger!" cried Missy, stormily.

"I ain't gwine see no chile o' mawster's 'scoutin' wid dem Furnivals," said old Gilbert, unmoved. "You tote 'yo self back ter de gret house, else I gwine tell Mawse-virey, nun."

Missy, after a few irresolute moments, wiped her tears on the skirt of her gingham sun bonnet, and went resolutely back to the gap in the garden paling, slipped through and confronted Glory-Ann in the latticed gallery between the kitchen and the main building.

Glory-Ann was seated in a low, splint-bottomed chair, with a broad, smooth board across her knees, and a pen-knife in her right hand; she was making ready to crimp Miss Elvira's ruffled apron that lay folded in a basket on the stool at her side. She paused in the act of lifting the apron from the basket, and looked over her spectacles with an air of grave rebuke at the flushed face of the child coming up the steps.

"I'm bound you ain't made nothin' by 'yo trip but two shoofuls o' sand," she said, severely.

For answer, Missy sat down on the floor, threw her bonnet into a corner, and pulling off her shoes, emptied two little piles of sand at Glory-Ann's feet.

"You gwine 'pont of all dis trapesin' in de brillin' sun, one o' dese days," Glory-Ann proceeded remorselessly. "De way you goes on is enough ter set dem freckles fur ever 'n' ever."

Missy put up her little sunburned hand and immediately rubbed her cheek. "My cousin Flora has got freckles—some," she said.

"None ter but!" retorted Glory-Ann. "And Deia Furnival ain't got one; she's prettier than my cousin Flora, anyhow. Missy proclaimed, with defiance.

Glory-Ann stopped her work, and clutching the two ends of the lap board while she straightened herself up, demanded: "Is you been ter dem Furnivals, Missy? Is you been?"

"Daddy Gilbert wouldn't let me," Missy pouted.

"Tubesho," said Glory-Ann. "What's a Thorne gutter do consortin' wid a Furnival, lak de Thorne is quality?"

"Dessie is more nicher than my cousin Flora," said the unrepentant Missy, stretching herself out on the floor, face downwards, resting on her elbows and supporting her chin in her hands, as she gazed up serenely at her admonisher. "She don't snap me up, ever."

"I'd lak ter see her try hit!" cried Glory-Ann, her very turban bristling with insulted family pride. "Miss Flora is a Thorne, en' a Thorne kin snap at a Thorne; but a Furnival—po' white trash!" And Glory-Ann made an emphatic pout in Miss Elvira's ruffle. "Don't lemme hear no mo' 'nuch talk," she commanded, with all the authority vested in her title of Mom Bee. Then she lifted up her voice and called sharply: "Amity! you triflin' gal, come here strett, en' put on dis chile's shoes."

Amity, a girl of fifteen, in training for Miss Winifred's maid, was seated in the shadow of the Chinaberry tree, beguiling the tedious of towel hemming by building sand houses over her feet. She started guiltily when she heard herself called, tumbled off the upturned cotton basket that served her for a stool and darted to the gallery, where she set herself at once to obey Glory-Ann's behest.

Missy offered no resistance; but as she did not choose to change her position, it was a work of some dexterity and no little time to put on the shoes and lace them up at Thorne Hill, however "time was plenty," as old Gilbert used to say, and Amity was in no mind to hurry.

"I'm gwine on 62 year," pursued Mom Bee, boastfully, "en' I has allers blonged in de Thorne family. I wuz bawn in de family, I wuz raised in de family, en' praise de Lawd, I specks ter die in de family. You is bound ter pay respect ter my words, Missy, for you en' Mawse Nick ain't de only ones I has fatch up. I had a han' in Mawse-virey's raisin', en' dere ain't nobody kin fault her manners. En' Missy-virey, she knows what a Thorne doin' blong 'long of a Furnival, en' a Furnival doin' blong 'long of a Thorne. Huckum you ain't pattenin' after Missy-virey? And Glory-Ann looked at her charge over her spectacles with stern, rebuking eyes.

Missy, freeing herself with a jerk from the hands of Amity, wheeled over, and sat bolt upright, inspired by a sudden and comforting recollection.

"Mom Bee, why is dat ginger pone?" she demanded.

CHAPTER II.
THE COLONEL'S SON.

When he had fingered his wealth to his satisfaction.

Old Gilbert climbed the high rail fence surrounding the field, and, having crossed the beaten path that led down to the spring, plunged at once into the woods, where the trees grew tall and close, and where the wild grape vines and the scarlet berries continually intercepted his advance; but with such obstacles he was accustomed to deal, and they did not deter him. He had a secret errand in this wood through which he made his way as if by instinct, for path there was none; but this ancient child of nature was at home in the wilderness; he knew all the trees that grew, and all plants that were for healing, and all noxious things to be avoided. He came at last to a little dell, shut in on every side by abruptly sloping ground, and almost impenetrable to the sunshine. Here, when he had rested awhile upon a lichen grown log, he knelt down, and, pushing aside a brush heap, laid bare a hole in the ground, wherein was set a wide and deep iron pot, protected by an iron lid, on top of which was a tin plate that covered a fracture large enough to admit old Gilbert's hand and arm. This was the bank to which he confided the dimes he received for chickens and eggs and the skilled labor of his hands, for old Gilbert was master of many crafts by which money was to be earned, and for all his jobs he was paid in good hard coin, an unquarrelable prejudice leading him to refuse what he called "lumber money."

As he had the privilege of selling his manufactures off the plantation, he commanded what might be termed a wide market. Often he sent his wares up to town; sometimes even he condescended to dispose of a mat or a broom to the despised Furnivals across the road. What he did with the money thus earned he told no one; what he meant to do with these accumulated small earnings of more than fifteen years—amounting now to quite a respectable sum—he himself did not know; but having no wife nor child, nor any kindred whom he cared to honor with gifts, the greatest satisfaction he could find in his money was to count it over. This ceremony he performed by an ingenious process of his own invention, that did away with the necessity of abstracting the coin when once it was deposited; each deposit being made in sums of \$5 securely fixed in a bit of assa-burg, the whole amount could be pretty accurately reckoned by touch, the account being kept upon a tally stick, which old Gilbert always carried with him.

When he had fingered his wealth to his satisfaction, Gilbert carefully readjusted the plaster over the tin broken

pot lid, raked the leaves over the spot, and skillfully heaped up the brush.

"Ole nigger gittin' stiddy, tubbe sho!" he said, rising with a grunt. "Time I wuz fixin' up 'nother bottle o' white assa-bok en' whisky. I git de bok en' Mawse-virey gimme de whisky. Hit ain't too late for sassyfac, nuther. Little Missy allers bonin' after sassyfac tea. I gwine tote her a bundle o' sassyfac ter de gret house dis night, see! I wuz 'blegged ter spite her 'bout dem Furnivals."

Old Gilbert took his way home by a roundabout route, through an old field known as the berry patch, where elder-bushes and assafras saplings grew rank in the fence corners, hedged round by little thickets of the odoriferous mint.

Here the old man set to work; down on his knees, by the aid of his ready jack knife, he was deftly extracting the roots whose rich aroma diffused itself around, when his trained ear caught the sound of steps approaching.

"Wha' dat?" he whispered to himself, with palpitating heart, lifting his head to listen.

A yellow cur, with cropped ears and barely three inches of tail, jumped upon a log on the other side of the fence, uttering a shrill bark.

Old Gilbert peered over the fence to right and left of him, along the bridge path that skirted the field.

"Why you come fum, you ondemanded beas' critter?" he said, scornfully eyeing the cur, which he recognized as the property of "dem Furnivals."

The dog answered with a yelp, jumped off the log and ran across the bridge path into the woods, but presently returned at the heels of a lank, sandy haired, sallow youth, clad in faded jeans.

Old Gilbert's heart knocked at his ribs as he thought of his treasure in the low of the wood; but "manners" demanded that some greeting should be given, and policy dictated a certain obsequiousness of tone, but the old negro bade the youth "Good morning!" with how very many degrees removed from the respect he would have accorded to "quality."

The lad responded with sullen reluctance.

"Whichever way is you comin' fum?" old Gilbert asked, insinuatingly.

"I dunno ez hit's any o' yo' business," was the surly answer. "I ain't no furer from home den you, en' I ain't a nigger. I'm a huntin' of a hawg, en' if you ain't tolled his ter 'yo pen, you ole prowler, maybe you're fur gittin' enter his tracks."

Old Gilbert's heart waxed hot. That he should be accused by this "po' white trash" of tolling away a lean and scrubby old hog!

"De Lor-a-mighty!" he exclaimed, with a sort of persuasive indignation. "Doan you en' yo' folks know what I have got haws ev' blessed year fattenin' cawntin'! I cuores my own bacon, en' is been doin' dat same, year in, year out, gwine on fo' you wuz bawn. Is 'sawed at ye?"

"Well," drawled the boy, measurably subdued by this reminder of a fact with which he was well acquainted, "I s'picioned as ye're allers run' these woods."

"Me?" interrupted old Gilbert, with an uneasy thought of his buried treasure; then, recovering himself, "I ain't offen ow' land," he said, with significance.

"Look a-her!" shouted the boy, advancing menacingly, while the cur growled and showed his teeth.

"En' I blongs ter Kernal Jasper Thorne," continued old Gilbert, with inflated superiority. "Ise a gemman's nigger, I is."

"I doan know ez that's anythin' to me," said Jesse Furnival, with sullen abatement of his wrath. "But, come, now ain't you seen nothin' of ole white sow in 'yo comin' en' goin's? I ain't inquirin' what ye air up to."

Old Gilbert had dropped on his knees and was tugging at the sassafras roots. "Ise comin' en' goin' on my own proper errands," he growled. "Ye cowers down here haw' me ter 'count 'bout dat. Howsomedever, I did see a lean ole white sow ez I come along."

"Whichever way?"

The eagerness of the inquiry was as fuel to the flame of old Gilbert's suspicions. "Side of de bridge path, followin' de woods," he said, avoiding all reference to the route by which he had come. "Speck she was gwine ter de branch. Why'n't you keep her pened? De ain't nothin' in de woods dis time o' year ter feed her."

"You ten' ter 'yo business en' I'll ten' ter mine," retorted Jesse Furnival. "Frownin' round these woods lak a free nigger. Ef the kernal ain't got nothin' better'n root diggin' fur you ter do, why'n't he send you ter keep track of that rackettin' sow o' his? Nick Thorne have been in a fix, I kin tell you, over yander ter Eden."

"Wha' dat?" old Gilbert asked, in quick alarm.

"Ain't the kernal hearn how Nick Thorne wuz nigh en' 'bout cut ter pieces in a row with Marcus White? Over a game o' poker."

This was about all that Jesse Furnival knew of the affair, but he hoped to learn more from old Gilbert.

"De gret mawster!" exclaimed the old man. "When wuz dat?"

"Oh, over en' above two months ago. Ain't hearn nothin' 'bout hit?"

"Look-a-her, boy," said old Gilbert, "dere ain't dat knife made what kin cut Nick Nicholas ter pieces. Doan you got ole so much lak arown? Who done his anybark?"

"Much you know!" sneered Jesse Furnival. "I done tol' you hit wuz Marcus White done hit, what is sorter kin ter us all, bein' he is second cousin ter Uncle Job's wife." And swelling with pride in the prowess of this family connection, the youth spread his feet wide apart, stuck his thumbs into his "galluses," and eyed old Gilbert defiantly.

"De law gwine hol' him 'countable," said old Gilbert.

"Ef the law kin git him!" retorted the boy, with exasperating laughter. "Marcus White is done put all Texas 'twixt him so de law."

This retorting suddenly to the object of his search, "I doan see no tracks," he said, inspecting the ground.

"No, she wuz travelin' de ridge of de woods," said old Gilbert; "in amongst de leaves."

The boy glanced towards the woods, called to his dog, and walked on.

"Po' white trash ain't got no manners, nobow; sassy'n of a gemman's nigger," muttered old Gilbert, glowering after him.

"Quality doan cuver talk to niggers dat's a way. Spose I is prowlin' 'bout dese woods? Hit's ow' woods! Lawd! Lawd! I won't be ever be send me down in de heller! Ise tol' a monstrous lie: I ain't send nader ole sow. But I wuz jes' blunderin' ez assa. Dret beg! I pissen

doan bullieve she's got meat 'nuff ont'er her bones ter feed de buzzards, dat ole Furnival sow, but I'm mighty skeered she'll have de stren'th ter go nosin' round dat speeshul breck heap. En' I'm 'sturbed in my min' 'bout Mawse Nick. Dat boy ain't stiddy ez he mought be, bless Gawd!"

The thoughts of all hearts at Thorne Hill were revolving around Nicholas Thorne at this time. On account of some irregularities at college he had been banished to "Sunrise," partly by way of punishment, partly by way of keeping him out of temptation. The friends of the family did not think this the wisest course to pursue with a young man of Nicholas Thorne's temperament, but the colonel was not a man to be advised, and Nicholas had been at Sunrise plantation since early in January. No hint of the quarrel with Marcus White had reached Thorne Hill as yet, but the colonel was secretly fretted that his son, in all this time, had never once said to be recalled, and Miss Elvira's deepest anxiety had been aroused by a note received a few days before, which had been mailed at Eden, the nearest postoffice to Sunrise, and was worded as follows:

"RESPECTED MAMM: I am a God-fearing woman, and I feel it on my conscience to warn the family of Mr. Nick Thorne that Sunrise Plantation is a lonesome place for a young man of spirits and lift he are not speedily removed out of harms way great trouble is in waitin and so no more from yours respectful,

"ROXANA WHITE."

Miss Elvira, not daring to show this note to her brother, lest it might widen the breach between him and his son, had gone up to town to consult her cousin, Mrs. Herry, in whose judgment she placed unbounded faith, though she had not always the courage to follow her advice. But Mrs. Herry was on a visit to her plantation in Jefferson, and Miss Elvira had returned still burdened with the affliction note, which she was always poring over when her brother was out of the way.

Began reading it furtively at the tea table as soon as the colonel retired to his musings on the front piazza. Missy, why had come in late to her supper, was eating waffles and honey with a lusty gusto that had driven Griffin Jim to a stool in the kitchen, with the remark, "Fo' legs is better'n two legs ter wait on Miss Winifred's delays," and thus Miss Elvira and her little niece were alone together.

Winifred improved the occasion.

"Aunt Elvira," said she, "don't you think it's time Mr. Nicholas was let to come home? He's been gone ever since befo' corn droppin'." Miss Elvira's calendar was of the plantation.

"Oh, Winifred, I'm afraid Nicholas ain't—always—well conducted," Miss Elvira stammered, not knowing what to reply.

"It ain't no difference to me if he is bad or good," said Missy sturdily; "he is Brer Nicholas. Only I don't believe he ain't just as good as can be."

"But he ought not to disappoint his father as he does," sighed Miss Elvira.

"Well, I reckon father disappoints him some," Missy replied, with precocious shrewdness.

"You don't understand, dear," said Miss Elvira, wondering a little at herself that she should speak so freely to this child. "I fear Nicholas is—wild." And Miss Elvira sighed deeply. In her vocabulary "wild" was a word of the strongest condemnation.

"Let him come home, then, and get tamed," said Missy, promptly.

This was Mrs. Herry's advice also. Mrs. Herry, who reasoned from a sound judgment, and her own deep experience in a like case. But to advocate Cousin Myrtilla's opinion openly was more than this student of Bishop Ken could venture upon. Her strongest hope was that Nicholas might be tamed by a marriage with the pretty cousin Flora Thorne, who had the merit of pleasing the colonel. That the colonel should be pleased was the all important point, in view of which Miss Elvira ignored the fact that she herself had not found Flora flawless. But this was not a subject to be discussed with Missy, and she felt relieved when Glory-Ann interrupted with the announcement:

"Missy-virey, heres ole man Gilbert. Dunno 'n' what he want. He mek gret parade o' secrecy 'bout what he got wrapped in a piece o' cloth; but nose kin smell sassyfac anywhere."

"Funnin'!" shouted Missy, and darted from the room.

"Jes' hear dat!" grumbled Glory-Ann, in jealous resentment, as she followed her to the back piazza. "Huckum she goes after ole man Gilbert, stiddy re-mains 'n' 'bout sassyfac."

"How'd ye, Missy-virey; hunn you do?" said old Gilbert, rising to bow and scrape, as he came out on the piazza.

"Thank you, pretty well, Gilbert. How do you do?"

"I'm ter say tollable, bless Gawd; Mawse-virey, I loved ter bring a dozen sizzles fur a mawment, but de ain't no laid up; an' I knowed Missy was gwine be glad o' some sassyfac, so I jes' come 'long so."

"Tere plenty of eggs just now, I'm much obliged, Gilbert."

"Tabbe sho!" said the old man, and paused and scratched his head. Then, with a desperate abruptness, "Missy-virey," said he, "when you hear fum Mawse Nicholas?"

"About a week ago," said Miss Elvira, hesitatingly.

"She ain't heerd 'bout dat cuttin' scrape," blundered ter leg of de shad, old Gilbert argued to himself; then aloud, "Hit do 'pear lak Mawse Nicholas orter blong ter Thorne Hill, Mawse-virey."

"Yes, he orter!" Missy declared.

"He's gwine on 21, Mawse Nick is, come some day de las' o' dis month. He orter be gittin' married."

"No, he orter!" Missy objected with violence.

Old Gilbert was doubled up with silent laughter when the colonel came out on the piazza. The colonel was a handsome man, though past fifty, tall, erect, with clear cut features of a somewhat stern and unbending cast. He was formal and precise in bearing, perhaps even a trifle pompous, but he could unbend occasionally, and with this favorite old slave he was always disposed to be peculiar.

"Hello, Gilbert!" he said. "Any baskets to sell? You must be getting rich."

"Dullaw, mawster! Dis po' ole 'count nigger gittin' rich! I ain't sellin' nair basket ter-night, sah; I come ter 'quaire 'bout Mawse Nick. Ez I beco's a-studyin', mawster, dat bein's how dere ain't no old jobs in tickler jes' now—s'poin' I wuz ter go down ter Sunrise, en' look after Mawse Nick a little."

"You call him an odd job, do you?"

Heard dat critter!" the old negro muttered, in fear and anger, as he stooped with haste to pull off his left shoe. "Hit's sich a bad sign ter hear a sereech owl; but de say, ef you put off 'yo left shoe, you put off de bad luck. Lawd, sen' no bad luck ain't gwine fall ter Mawse Nick, 'long o' dat 'sturbance what dat Jesse Furnival named ter me. Lemme gittouten dishy-er grove quick ez ole Brandy kin tote me."

But old Gilbert had to endure the screams of the screech owl yet some minutes longer, before he came to the second gate in front of the house of leaved logs, which was neither a cramped nor a comfortable dwelling, though it moved the scorn of the old negro fresh from the grandeur of Thorne Hill. "Rick a place fur Mawse Nick!" he ejaculated contemptuously, as he halted his ox.

A vociferous chorus from the dogs greeted his arrival, and Gilbert promptly kept his perch on the cart, shouting lustily, "Hello!"

"Hello, yourself!" answered a voice through the dusk.

"Dat's him, bless Glory!" the old man chuckled, as he clambered down from the cart, while the same voice was heard silencing the dogs.

Nicholas was standing on the piazza dimly outlined in the uncertain light of the new risen moon; a goodly young fellow, tall, broad shouldered, and straight as an arrow; his great brown eyes, his curling dark hair, his straight nose and rounded cheeks, his broad forehead, and his mouth and chin with the silky, red brown beard of early manhood, old Gilbert knew by heart.

"How'd ye, Mawse Nicholas! hunn you do?" he shouted, with a chuckle of exuberant delight, as he stabled up the steps of awn' blocks.

"Why, where in thunder did you come from?" cried Nicholas. "Anything the matter at home?"

"No, Mawse Nick, doan you be uneasy. De is all peart. Hit's jes' me, same ole ol' ol' ol'."

said the colonel, not without bitterness.

"Now, mawster, you is comical, tubbe sho! Hit's gwine on night two years sence Mawse Nick been home ter stay, en' I'm gittin' ole. I hankers ter see dat boy what I mos'ly raised."

"Laws-massy! Heard dat, now?" ejaculated Glory-Ann in the background.

"How long do you mean to stay?" the colonel asked, not unwilling to make indirect overtures to his son.

"Hit's a matter of thirty mile en' better," said old Gilbert, meditatively rubbing his forehead with his horny forefinger. "A day ter go and a day to come."

"Suppose you go to-morrow?" the colonel suggested, with secret strong approval. "You can take the ox cart."

"Yes, sah," replied old Gilbert, with a hesitating thought of the hollow in the wood where his treasure was buried. "I ha' ter start 'fo' sun-up."

"Very well. I'll write you a pass. Nicholas can write you another to return with."

This meant unlimited leave of absence. "Thankee, sah," said Gilbert, with his lowest bow.

Glory-Ann immediately sought Daphne, Miss Elvira's maid, for the satisfaction of expressing her mind.

"Jes' you orter hear dat succumbant ole tigger chainin' dat he raised Mawse Nicholas!" said she, in high indignation. "Wuz wuz me, I'd lak ter know? En' whiles I'm a raisin' en' a mindin' of Missy, here he is cavortin' in 'bout de kennel in de yox eyart. When she gits groved s'poin' he'll be layin' claim ter her raisin' en' exactin' priviledges 'cordin'."

CHAPTER III.
AMBASSADOR EXTRAORDINARY.

"How'd ye, Mawse Nicholas! hunn you do?"

At break of day old Gilbert set forth on his journey in the jolting little cart, drawn by a small black ox that went a plodding gait.

The old man, with a view to doing Mawse Nicholas honor, was attired in his Sunday best—a blue broadcloth coat with brass buttons, and a black satin vest, once the property of Col. Thorne's father, a pair of nankin pantaloons, and a white hat, stiff and tall, discarded by the colonel. He sat upon a plank across the front of the cart, with his feet dangling outside. The plank was cushioned by a blanket in which was folded his every day suit of homespun. A box that held a contribution to Nicholas' larder, from Miss Elvira, was safely bestowed in one corner, at the bottom of the cart, where a wallet containing his noon refreshment lay beside a dingy umbrella, the cherished possession of twenty years.

Late in the afternoon, he came to an extreme of pine barrens, vast, solemn, sombre, it stretched in every direction the rays of the sinking sun shining faintly athwart the multitudinous, tall dark trees, whose boughs, swaying in the upper air, maintained a continuous murmur that emphasized the silence. Himself and his ox were the only living creatures visible in this solitude, save an occasional bird that darted above his head, as if in haste to escape to a more genial wood; and old Gilbert, to keep himself in heart, began to sing his hymns. Lifting up his voice, he made the solitude respond to a weird strain, in harmony with the sighing of the pines:

Oh, brin' hussle, hussle, hussle,
Oh, brin' hussle, de best ole soul!
Oh, brin' hussle, hussle, hussle,
Oh, brin' hussle, de best ole soul!

The sun was down, and the moon not yet risen, when he came out on the other side of the barrens, where he ceased his singing, being now near his journey's end; for at the foot of the slope was the large red gate that gave entrance to Sunrise plantation.

Old Gilbert dismounted, with some rheumatic grunts, to open this gate. A whippoorwill was calling in the grove through which he had to drive to the house; and as he climbed back upon the cart, a screech owl uttered its uncanny cry.

"Dat dat critter!" the old negro muttered, in fear and anger, as he stooped with haste to pull off his left shoe. "Hit's sich a bad sign ter hear a sereech owl; but de say, ef you put off 'yo left shoe, you put off de bad luck. Lawd, sen' no bad luck ain't gwine fall ter Mawse Nick, 'long o' dat 'sturbance what dat Jesse Furnival named ter me. Lemme gittouten dishy-er grove quick ez ole Brandy kin tote me."

But old Gilbert had to endure the screams of the screech owl yet some minutes longer, before he came to the second gate in front of the house of leaved logs, which was neither a cramped nor a comfortable dwelling, though it moved the scorn of the old negro fresh from the grandeur of Thorne Hill. "Rick a place fur Mawse Nick!" he ejaculated contemptuously, as he halted his ox.

A vociferous chorus from the dogs greeted his arrival, and Gilbert promptly kept his perch on the cart, shouting lustily, "Hello!"

"Hello, yourself!" answered a voice through the dusk.

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Nicholas was standing on the piazza dimly outlined in the uncertain light of the new risen moon; a goodly young fellow, tall, broad shouldered, and straight as an arrow; his great brown eyes, his curling dark hair, his straight nose and rounded cheeks, his broad forehead, and his mouth and chin with the silky, red brown beard of early manhood, old Gilbert knew by heart.

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"Why, where in thunder did you come from?" cried Nicholas. "Anything the matter at home?"

"No, Mawse Nick, doan you be uneasy. De is all peart. Hit's jes' me, same ole ol' ol'."

"Aha! come a courtin'!" Nicholas returned with a laugh. "Can't you see you're gotten up to hill?"

"Now, Mawse Nick! Pokin' fun at dis ole nigger! I come a-purpose to see you. Tere lak hit's so lonesome ter de Hill, douten you en' Mawse-virey, she sent you a box o' goodies. I'll jes' step back en' fetch em outen de eyart."

But Nicholas forbade. "Here, Virgil, go bring in those things," he commanded a negro boy who was hanging about the piazza. "Hungry and tired, I reckon you are, ole man?"

"No, Mawse Nick, I ain't so hungry; but ridin' is pow'ful stiffenin', en' ef you please, sah, I'll jes' drop down here on de steps. Hit's a monstrous good sight jes' ter look at ya, Mawse Nick."

"Well, I'm not sure but the sentiment is reciprocated in my own personality," Nicholas responded scornfully.

"What dat, Mawse Nicholas?"

"What I mean to say," replied Nicholas, with due gravity, "is, that the visual perception of your material essence awakens a sensation in the cardiac region that completely eliminates any inclination to despondency."

"Mawse Nicholas," said old Gilbert, in solemn admiration, "you orter go 'bout de kentry talkin' politics, you orter! You'd git 'lected ter somethin', sho' ez shootin'!"

But this now, Mawse Nick! He suddenly interrupted himself, starting up, "dat boy orter be mighty kettin' how he handles dem things, he wuz ter be de best man outen dat box what Mawse-virey put de goodies in. Ez' dere's my mawment! He is exclaimin', exactly, as Virgil staggered through the gate. "Min' how you tote dat rumblin', you plantations nigger! Han'tcher! You gwine brin' dem ribs, en' den what! Disker rumblin' is older den you is, Mawse Nick," he explained with pride, as he spread it open to satisfy himself that it was unbroken. "Hit was yo' gran'paw giv' him ter me, en' De tote hit over you many's de time, when you wuz a baby. We doan see no sich ev'ry day," he declared, shutting the umbrella with a snap, and turning to caress Virgil about the box.

"Missy charged me to tote you, dere is a sassy heart in dat some body she sent you, Mawse Nick, dat she kissed it when she wropped hit up."

"Dear little missy!" Nicholas sighed, half to himself. "How I wish she were nearer my own age."

"Tere's Miss Flora, you know," said Gilbert, insinuating